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The relationship between comprehensive school, the principle of educational continuity and the research on vertical curriculum.

Giovanni Arduini[a]*

[a]*University of Cassino e del Lazio Meridionale, Cassino(FR) 03043,Italy*

Abstract

The inception of new possibilities of integration between educational systems and the spread of structural and functional flexibility in teaching organization and methods were the consequences of the establishment of comprehensive schools. Particular care has been put in the construction of a vertical curriculum based on the principle of continuity, mainly considered in a pedagogical sense. Continuity results, therefore, from the need to ensure the pupil's right to an organic and complete training process, aimed at promoting an articulated and multidimensional development of the subject who is building its identity. The construction of the vertical curriculum shall take account of the skills that the child should acquire from his training and of its evaluation process based on the principles of authentic assessment.

Keywords: comprehensive institute, educational continuity, vertical curriculum, competences, evaluation;

1. Introduction

The comprehensive institute embodies the idea of a primary school that enjoys its community's trust, because it is committed to a visible and consistent educational project. For almost twenty years the comprehensive institute, that is the aggregation of kindergarten, primary and secondary schools of the same territory into a single functional structure, is the result of an original intuition and has a relevant pedagogical interest for the Italian educational system.

Although the choice of comprehensive schools was mainly due to reasons of cost containment, having entered the compulsory generalization of comprehensive schools within a merely financial legislative measure with Law no. 111 of 15/07/2011, however, especially now that comprehensive schools fall under the "normal" school system, there is the need to think about the role that this type of organization can play in strengthening basic education with the definition of a framework of relevant skills, and in trying to promote them effectively thanks to the ability to build an innovative educational environment.

2. The vertical curriculum

Important principles are reaffirmed in the new Guidelines for basic education, with the decisive innovation of the concrete stressing of the curriculum verticality. Although the curriculum setting could also be realized in separate

* Corresponding Author Tel.: +39-0776 299 3421
E-mail address: g.arduini@unicas.it

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schools, it is doubtless that more significant results can be achieved in a single educational institute. In fact, the years of schooling from three to fourteen years, while embracing three levels of school each characterized by a specific educational and professional identity, are progressive and continuous. Comprehensive institutes allow the creation of a single vertical curriculum and facilitate the connection with secondary school. Educational continuity, which is crucial if it is interpreted in a substantial way, coincides therefore with the implementation of the vertical curriculum.

2.1 The curriculum and the disciplines

The vertical curriculum allows to cross vertical reflection with considerations on disciplinary knowledge and to reach the educational value starting from some fundamental subjects (languages, mathematics, science and history).

The centre of the school curriculum, therefore, is no longer represented by the prescriptive character of a program, but by the learning of each student in his course, that starts from kindergarten, continues in primary school and finally, in secondary school, should be characterized by quality rather than a linear but necessarily incomplete sequence of disciplinary contents.

The quality of learning can be reached through precise cultural and educational choices. On the one hand, those choices should avoid discussions of topics distant from the experience and comprising fragmented knowledge; on the other hand, they should enable the realization of educational activities in the form of laboratories to facilitate efficiency and, at the same time, the dialogue and reflection on what is done. In fact, the laboratory can be the best way to encourage research and planning, involving students in thinking, implementing, evaluating activities that have been experienced and shared with others, and that can be activated both in different spaces and times inside the school, or promoting the territory as a learning resource.

2.2 The organization of a vertical curriculum

The vertical organization of the curriculum can stimulate innovations in terms of methodology and organization of disciplines to facilitate connections, relationships, awareness. The verticality does not only concern the easy comparison between the "primary level" where the approach to knowledge is based on a highly perceptive and operational dimension, and "secondary level" in which the approach to knowledge is already filtered by the symbolic representations between proximity and distance, that is between the subject and object of knowledge, between text and context, between formal and informal, between pre-discipline and discipline. It is this imbalance between the two polarities that characterizes the pace of learning and pervades the whole educational journey, from 3 to 14 years. It is therefore not possible to demarcate clearly the relationship between these two phases, perhaps making it coincide with a parallel reading of the different learning environments typical of the primary and secondary levels. Just as it is unthinkable to put the encounter with the secondary level during the transition from the primary one. The curriculum can be taken as a "progression" of increasing complexity, with different gradients in relation to the disciplinary structure.

3. The competences

The current proposals for school curricula reform start from the belief that, in order to ensure a qualified education, it is necessary to emphasize the pupils' ability to use what they learn in class in tasks and complex situations in school and in life: this minimum level must be thought of in terms of skills. Competence becomes therefore a principle for the organization of the curriculum through which include real life in class.

The pedagogical challenge of skills is to try to create in an"artificial" context as the school "authentic" learning conditions. The approach via competences can be interpreted as a tool that can bring real life in class, to promote the opening of the school, no longer isolated from everyday life, facilitating also the more targeted and narrow links with the real world and its transformation needs.

3.1 The definition of competences

Different types of skills can be distinguished in the perspective of curricular skills:
- Skills related to basic literacy: reading, mathematics and science (such as those included in OECD-PISA tests);
- Instrumental competences to integrate in cultural contents;
- Metacognitive skills;
- Skills for life (Life Skills).

It may indicate some constitutive elements of the development of competency-based educational courses (Figure 1) that, after an initial definition of the professional requirements in terms of knowledge, skills and attitude (competencies), provide: the complete definition of the learning goals and expected results; the transcription of the learning goals in programs stating the contents and methodological approaches to be followed; the identification of the evaluation criteria; the development of a device-oriented "authentic assessment" carried out through observations, records, classifications of evidence related to activities and productions in real situations.

In the suggested scheme it can be noticed that, starting from a competence such as that of compulsory education, this is divided and articulated into "competence units". It is structured in several parts: title, timings, levels and prerequisites with the aim to define. In the end, the competence is declined in secondary units accompanied by the evaluation criteria. The key concept is that of "learning outcome", conveyed today in Europe especially through the model EQF (European Qualification Framework) and included in the 2008 Recommendation jointly adopted by the European Parliament and the European Council.

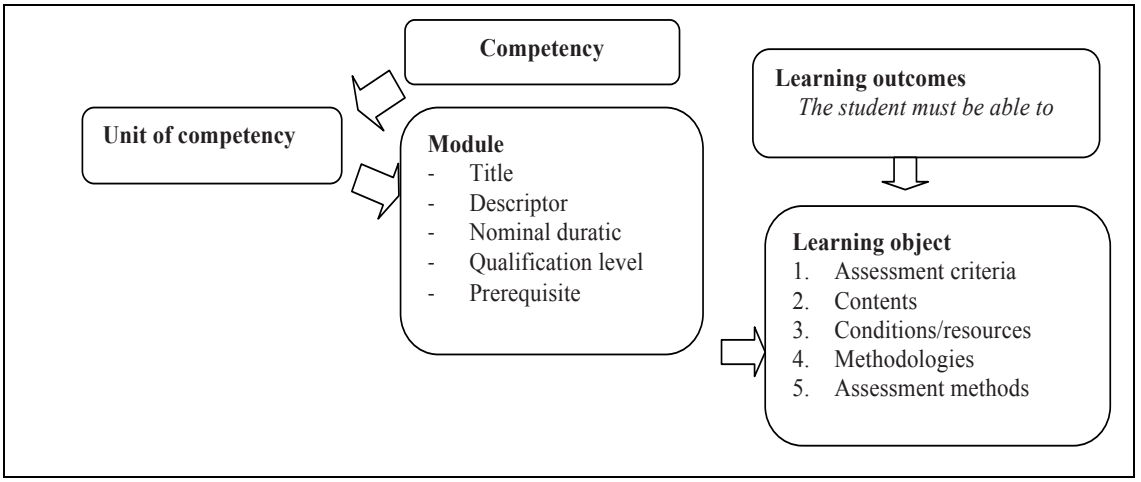

Figure 1- Example of Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC)

4. The competences evaluation

One of the biggest problems of the approach through skills rather than the traditional disciplinary curriculum approach is that of evaluation, because the problem of how to measure skills is not easy to solve.

It certainly is a great challenge for the school to ensure that students, since their entry into the course of their studies, learn to express their views, to defend them with rational arguments, to communicate their ideas to people

who think differently, to solve new problems, to be creative, not to fear divergent ways of thinking, but the evaluation of these new acquisitions remains an unsolved problem for the school.

During recent years, school teachers of all levels have been facing terms that are not always well defined and clear. This is the case of the expressions of abilities, skills and knowledge. On the definitions of these words, however, there is a convergence of ideas. So skills means the ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems; knowledge indicates the outcome of the assimilation of information through learning; competence means the proven ability to use knowledge, skills, social and/or methodological abilities in work situations, study and professional and/or personal development.

As a substitute of the conception of the child "all intuition, imagination and feeling" is proposed, therefore, that of the "competent child." According to this view, the school environment is dealing with the paradigm shift that sees skills and basic competencies in the place of knowledge and the essential awareness.

To pursue this important and fundamental goal, it is necessary that the teacher is competent in the pedagogical and methodological-didactic field, with the establishment of procedures and parameters to measure and assess skills.

The Ministerial Decree No.9 of 2010 established the requirement for certification of the skills acquired by students who complete their ten-year cycle of studies. This request represents an important development for the Italian school, which is called upon to assess not only the knowledge and skills of students, but also their skills in real or credible contexts.

The ministerial note states that the certification should allow pupils already at the end of the first cycle to "know their position in relation to levels of learning and competence frameworks that respond to general references."

4.1 The formative value of competence certification

So in addition to the legal aspects of communication, the certification assumes a formative value, while performing the function of describing a path, the awareness of progresses (in the form of self-assessment), of a earning progression.

In the current Italian school system is certainly appropriate to proceed giving priority to the final certification, because this stage is an important step in the students' biography, considering the fact that no qualification title is released. At 16 one may terminate the formal school curriculum and choose to start looking for a job, an apprenticeship, a professional training. It is therefore important that adolescents arrive in these new scenarios with their own "package" of skills that can be recognized and used to facilitate their insertion. In case of continuation of education within the last three years of high school or in case of choice of a different course of studies, certification could take a formative-informative character, to confirm and re-orient courses.

In the national model of skills certification, at the age of 16 there are three formalized levels that can invoke the idea of a progression of skills.

Basic level: *The students carry out simple tasks in known situations, showing that they have knowledge and skills essential to be able to apply basic rules and procedures.*

Intermediate level*: The students perform tasks and solve complex problems in known situations, make conscious choices, showing they are able to use the knowledge and skills they have acquired.*

Advanced level*: The students perform tasks and complex problems in situations also unknown, showing proficiency in the use of knowledge and skills. E.g. they propose and support their opinions and take decisions independently.*

Figure 2 - The three levels of competences according to the national model of competence certification at 16

The path leading to the possession of knowledge is therefore long when you need to see the student in a "holistic" way. The model of certification proposed should not be seen as a point of arrival, but it should be a tool to ensure that the student maintains and cultivates interest for knowledge, for its human growth, that is not stopping at a dry list of points on the basis of which he has to be certified as a competent person.

In fact, from the attention to learning processes of individual learners, derives the passage to a greater consideration of the results of these processes through the certification of skills, in terms of results, in the vertical curriculum that includes the three orders of school present in the comprehensive institute. However, an assessment which does not take the whole process into account and stops only to celebrate the final act does not make sense, since the evaluation process is an action that needs to be built with particular attention to knowledge and social skills baseline.

The evaluation problem is not that of giving a mark, but to analyse that mark, to understand what it contains or implies, how the student has arrived there, what did the school do to bring him there, what chance has he got to move forward and what are the chances he might retrograde.

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